OMNI VIETNAM WAR NEWSLETTER #4, April 13, 2013,
Compiled by Dick Bennett for a Culture of Peace.  (#1 July 24, 2011; #2 June 9, 2012; #3 Sept. 25, 2012).

My blog: War Department and Peace Department
http://jamesrichardbennett.blogspot.com/

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http://www.omnicenter.org/newsletter-archive/

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http://www.omnicenter.org/omni-newsletter-general-index/

See: Imperialism, Militarism, Pentagon, Recruiting, Suicides, Whistleblowing, and more.

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French paratroopers landing at Dien Bien Phu in November 1953.

In November 1953, France was in its eighth year of war for control over Indochina. Things were going poorly—Vietnamese guerrillas, or Vietminh, held the upper hand—and at a strategy session in Saigon the French commander, Gen. Henri Navarre, outlined his latest plan. "I'm thinking of occupying the basin of Dien Bien Phu," he began. "The goal of this risky operation will be to defend Laos." He went on to argue that the move would draw the Vietminh into a battle they could not win. France had the advantage of air power. A base at Dien Bien Phu—in the northwest corner of Vietnam, near the Laos border—could be resupplied by air, while guerrilla leader Ho Chi Minh's cadres would be forced to move huge numbers of men and matériel through miles of mountain jungle. Finishing his presentation, Gen. Navarre turned to
The politicians were onboard—but the officers balked. The military men were "unanimous in objection," one senior officer noted. Building a base in a mountain valley, they told Gen. Navarre, presented formidable challenges. Dropping in paratroopers would be dangerous, resuppling the base difficult, and Dien Bien Phu would drain manpower from more important theaters—all for questionable military gain. Nevertheless, Gen. Navarre got his base. Within months—on May 7, 1954, to be exact—Dien Bien Phu was overrun by the Vietminh. Two years later Gen. Navarre was rewriting history in his memoir of the war. "No unfavorable opinion," he wrote, "was expressed before the battle."

The annals of warfare are of course studded with questionable military decisions and after-battle lies, but for sheer hubris and incompetence it is hard to match what happened before and during the 56-day battle for Dien Bien Phu. Ted Morgan's "Valley of Death" is an authoritative account of those days—but it's also a history of the early U.S. involvement in Indochina. "The words Dien Bien Phu," President Dwight Eisenhower told a conference of newspaper publishers in April 1954, "are no longer just a funny-sounding name to be dismissed from the breakfast conversation because we don't know where it is." Indeed, by then Dien Bien Phu was proving a disaster for the French—one that held warning signs for the U.S.

Nearly every French assumption would be punctured that spring. None proved more disastrous than Gen. Navarre's faith in the power of air supremacy. The Vietnamese, led by the brilliant general Vo Nguyen Giap (whom the Americans would face a decade later), moved a seemingly limitless supply of men and munitions through the jungle to Dien Bien Phu. It was a mind-bending feat, and it gave the Vietminh high ground above the French base. In a memorable analysis, Ho Chi Minh turned a helmet upside down, pointed to the bottom and said: "That's where the French are." Fingering the helmet's rim, he added, "that's where we are. They will never get out."

Ho was right—and his forces held other advantages. China sent the Vietminh food, medicine and heavy weaponry. As a guerrilla force, the Vietminh enjoyed the edge in motivation and in knowledge of terrain. As Mr. Morgan writes: "The French had an air force. The Vietminh had home-field advantage and could count on the support of the rural population."
Victorious Vietminh guerrillas raise their flag over the French command bunker in May 1954. The French suffered more than 2,000 dead or presumed dead; more than 10,000 were taken prisoner.

In the meantime, French blunders multiplied. France’s commissioner general for Indochina was "better known for his champagne dinners in Saigon than his military knowledge." As soldiers died waiting for fresh supplies of food and medicine, parachute teams were delayed because they lacked training certificates. All the while, horrors accumulated on the battlefield. Wounded men languished in overcrowded wards; trenches filled with corpses; monsoon rains flooded the French camp. As conditions deteriorated, evacuation became nearly impossible. Mr. Morgan draws a stirring portrait of the French medic Paul Grauwin, who worked in soaked-through, maggot-infested tents handling "an unending procession of blinded eyes, broken jaws, chests blown open and fractured limbs." Certainly courage was not lacking at Dien Bien Phu.

For years, Indochina had been a geopolitical sideshow for the U.S. After World War II,
Washington stood with the region's liberation movements—and so, as a gesture of friendship, a small contingent of American paratroopers was dropped into Ho Chi Minh's forward base in July 1945. Mr. Morgan gives a fascinating account of the meeting: The paratroopers are greeted by a banner hailing "our American friends," and a U.S. medic treats Ho for a dangerously high fever. Says Mr. Morgan: "It is entirely possible that the life of the future president of North Vietnam was saved by an American medic."

Of course the early friendship frayed as anticommunism gripped 1950s Washington. No fewer than seven U.S. presidents and would-be presidents appear in Mr. Morgan's book, and their words make compelling reading, given what was to come. As Dien Bien Phu nears collapse, Eisenhower worries about falling dominoes in Southeast Asia but remains steadfast against intervening on France's behalf. "No one could be more bitterly opposed to ever getting the U.S. involved in a hot war in that region than I am." John F. Kennedy, a senator from Massachusetts at the time, is just as firm: "To pour money, matériel and men into the jungles of Indochina without at least a remote prospect of victory would be dangerously futile and self-destructive." Among future commanders in chief, only Richard Nixon stands unabashedly for intervention.

Valley of Death
By Ted Morgan
Random House, 722 pages, $35

• Read an excerpt
Still, as the French plight worsened, American diplomats searched for ways to help. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles pressed Congress and the British for a muscular response, but Dulles found few takers. "No more Koreas, with the U.S. furnishing 90% of the manpower," vowed Senate Majority Leader William Knowland, a Republican from California. As monsoons turned Dien Bien Phu to muck, diplomacy bogged down in its own way. No reinforcements would be forthcoming. In the end, the Vietminh laid siege to the French positions, swarming the valley and capturing thousands of prisoners. For France, the catastrophe meant the end of an era, the loss of a jewel in its colonial realm. For Vietnam, it meant partition into North and South. And for the U.S.—though no one knew it then—it meant the seeds had been sown for another Indochina war.

"Valley of Death" draws deeply on documentary evidence from all sides—French and Vietnamese, American and British, Russian and Chinese. Mr. Morgan's chronicle is exhaustive — sometimes overly so. There are nearly 200 pages of buildup before Dien Bien Phu is mentioned. On the diplomatic front, though one marvels at Mr. Morgan's ability to bring the reader into the negotiating rooms, after a while one finds oneself eager to leave.

Much has been made of Dien Bien Phu's lessons—lessons that the U.S. perhaps should have heeded in Vietnam: the tenacity of the country's indigenous forces, their passion and organization, and the difficulties posed by climate and terrain. But the descriptions of battle in "Valley of Death" are instructive for any military endeavor. At its best, the book is a blistering indictment of commanders whose missteps and arrogance condemn young soldiers to terrible fates. Mr. Morgan tells the haunting story of a French colonel who takes his own life after the fall of a key position. A few days later a young officer reflects: "If all those responsible for what's happening decide to kill themselves, it's going to be quite a crowd in Paris as well as Dien Bien Phu."

—Mr. Nagorski, a senior producer at ABC News, is the author of "Miracles on the Water: The Heroic Survivors of a World War II U-Boat Attack."

Reports Via Veterans for Peace

Landmines still exacting a heavy toll on Vietnamese civilians Wed Sep 19, 2012. Posted by: "Chuck Palazzo" VfP

37 years on, unexploded bombs continue to ruin lives in the former wartime frontline regions of Vietnam.

http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/sep/18/vietnam-unexploded-landmines-bombs
Reflections on the Vietnam War: The Things a Warrior Knows

Mon Mar 4, 2013 1:09 pm (PST) . Posted by:
"Dave Culver" mplsstreetrwy

* We struggle every day to believe in a life that was almost taken away from us. We know that even though we have lost, though parts of our bodies may be missing, though we might not be able to see or feel, we are important men and women with important lessons to teach.
* In Pictures: Ron Kovic Today
* Nick Turse Describes the Real Vietnam War

Ron Kovic, TruthDig
Jan 19, 2013 | There is nothing in the lives of human beings more brutal and terrifying than war, and nothing more important than for those of us who have experienced it to share its awful truth.

As the 45th anniversary of my being shot and paralyzed in the Vietnam War approaches, I cannot help but reflect upon those years and the many lessons I have learned. Nearly half a century has passed since I left my house in Massapequa, N.Y., to join the United States Marine Corp and begin an extraordinary journey that led me into a disastrous war that changed my life and others of my generation profoundly and forever.

Full story... http://evergreenedigest.org/reflections-vietnam-war-things-warrior-knows

Related:
* In Pictures: Ron Kovic Today, Zuade Kaufman, TruthDig
  > http://www.truthdig.com/avbooth/item/
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* Nick Turse Describes the Real Vietnam War, Bill Moyers, Moyers & company
  http://billmoyers.com>
  > http://evergreenedigest.org/nick-turse-describes-real-vietnam-war
American culture has never fully come to grips with Vietnam,² Turse tells Bill, referring to "hidden and forbidden histories that just haven’t been fully engaged."²

Excerpt: Kill Anything That Moves ~ Nick Turse

Have we really learned the lessons of Vietnam?

SYSTEMATIC WAR CRIMES

NICK TURSE, KILL ANYTHING THAT MOVES: INTERVIEW BY BILL MOYERS FEB. 2013

Based on classified documents and first-person interviews, a startling and sure to be controversial history of the American war on Vietnamese civilians.

Devastating and definitive, Kill Anything That Moves finally brings us face-to-face with the truth of a war that haunts America to this day.

February 9th, 2013 at 10:15AM

nickturse:

Nick Turse talks to Bill Moyers about his book Kill Anything that Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam and about the ghosts of people and issues not properly put to rest in the years following the Vietnam war. In Vietnam, says Turse, a person who dies outside his or her home dies "a bad death," and it’s the responsibility of the deceased’s relatives to make peace with the person’s “wandering ghost.” The multi-decade war with Vietnam, Turse says, is America’s wandering ghost, a conflict with which America has never managed to make peace.

For more, click here.

February 8th, 2013 at 9:22PM

killanythingthatmoves:

Troops in the field regularly carved their unit’s initials or numbers into corpses, adorned bodies with their unit’s patch, or left a “death card”— generally either an ace of spades or a custom- printed business card claiming credit for the kill. Company A, 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry of the 198th Light Infantry Brigade, for example, left their victims with a customized ace of spades sporting the unit’s formal designation, its nickname (“Gunfighters”), a skull and crossbones, and the phrase “dealers of death.”

— Nick Turse, Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam

February 7th, 2013 at 9:23PM

nickturse:

This weekend on Moyers & Company, journalist Nick Turse joins Bill to describe his unprecedented efforts to compile a complete and compelling account of the Vietnam War’s horror as experienced by all sides, including innocent civilians who were sucked into its violent vortex. Turse, who devoted
12 years to tracking down the true story of Vietnam, unlocked secret troves of documents, interviewed officials and veterans – including many accused of war atrocities – and traveled throughout the Vietnamese countryside talking with eyewitnesses to create his book, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*.

“American culture has never fully come to grips with Vietnam,” Turse tells Bill, referring to “hidden and forbidden histories that just haven’t been fully engaged.”

(For more, see: Preview: Who’s Widening America’s Digital Divide? | Moyers & Company | BillMoyers.com)

Troops in the field regularly carved their unit’s initials or numbers into corpses, adorned bodies with their unit’s patch, or left a “death card”— generally either an ace of spades or a custom printed business card claiming credit for the kill. Company A, 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry of the 198th Light Infantry Brigade, for example, left their victims with a customized ace of spades sporting the unit’s formal designation, its nickname (“Gunfighters”), a skull and crossbones, and the phrase “dealers of death.”

— Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*

*U.S. Marine wields a flame thrower during Operation New Castle, 03/26/1967.*

*Photo courtesy of NARA, Records of the U.S. Marine Corps, 1775 - onward.*
Americans in Vietnam never seemed to run out of ways to burn things down, whether it be flame tanks, flame boats, napalm canisters dropped from planes, helicopters armed with white phosphorus rockets, or simply ground troops with zippo cigarette lighters. The means were seemingly endless.

1. Moyers & Company | WETA
www.weta.org/tv/programsatoz/program/82075
Also: journalist Nick Turse ("Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam"). Rating: TV-G. WETA HD Logo. Airs on. WETA HD. Sun., February 10 ...

2. Watch Bill Moyers w/ Nick Turse on his book about new docs ...
inagist.com/all/300616684052553729/
@GregMitch Feb 10, 2013 14:46:17 GMT Follow @GregMitch 2 retweets ... Moyers &Company | BillMoyers.com ... Civilians killed systematically in The Vietnam War : NPR http://t.co/do31bed6 10 days 3 hours ago ... 2013/01/28 ...
www.truthdig.com · @GregMitch : Nick Turse's "Kill Anything that Moves" should destroy ...

3. Book Club » BillMoyers.com - Moyers & Company
billmoyers.com/category/book-club/
February 8, 2013 ... by Nick Turse. Read the introduction from Nick Turse’s book, Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American .... Moyers & Company Books of 2012 ....In fact, those making $5 or $10 million probably don't feel like they are ...
"How Did the Gates of Hell Open in Vietnam?"
By Jonathan Schell, TomDispatch.com, posted January 17
Review of Nick Turse's new book Anything That Moves

THE PROTEST

In This Section
- We Have Not Been Moved: Resisting Racism and Militarism in 21st Century America
- The Pie Chart
- Civilian Ally
- War Tax Resistance
- WRL Peace Calendar
- WRI Handbook for Nonviolent Campaigns
- WRL Posters
  - WIN Magazine
  - WIN Magazine Winter 2012
  - WIN Winter 2012
  - Arab America
  - Doing Time for Peace
  - Food & Liquor II
The Catonsville Nine: A Story of Faith and Resistance in the Vietnam Era

Review: “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children” By Rosalie Riegle, Win Magazine

The Catonsville Nine: A Story of Faith and Resistance in the Vietnam Era
by Shawn Francis Peters

Oxford University Press.
416pp, $34.95

Even as a kid, Shawn Peters was fascinated by the story of the Catonsville Nine, the first group of resisters to burn draft files during the Vietnam War. Growing up in Catonsville and schooled by conservative nuns who denounced the group, he learned how they awaited arrest for their action and used their trial to put the war itself on the stand. He reveled in their audacity, their creativity, and their courage as they faced trial, appeals, and imprisonment. Years and much detailed research later, he has given us an intriguing story, replete with lessons for resisters of today.

What’s best about this book is the fact that it’s about all of the Nine, not just about the Berrigan brothers who received, and still receive, the lion’s share (cliché intended) of print and visual attention. For lions they were — big, craggy then-Father Phil, with his commanding personality and stalwart insistence that something could be done to make the war powers listen; Jesuit Father Dan, with his ebullient personality, poetic giftedness, and a charisma that continues to this day, even when he can no longer jump onto a stage or disappear into a puppet as he did when he was “on the lam” after sentencing for the draft board action. Phil Berrigan left the formal priesthood and went on to found Jonah House. There, with his wife Liz McAlister, he parented three children and the Plowshares antinuclear movement. Even in retirement, Fr. Dan still shepherds the peace movement. His play, The Trial of the Catonsville Nine, contains his line from the trial, “Our apologies, good friends, for the fracture of good order, the burning of paper instead of children.”

While these two are rightly remembered, Peters gives us clear pictures of each of the participants and successfully situates them in the political context of the times as he painstakingly details their lives and actions in the months surrounding the trial. We meet the gentle yet determined artist Tom Lewis, the unassuming John Hogan, and the mercurial Brother David Darst, tragically killed in a car accident before reporting for prison. Darst had publicly explained his rationale to WIN: “Something [had to] be done to stop the storm, to shake up this system of ours so that it has the chance to radically rearrange its values.”

TENACITY AND NEGLECT

We hear of the tenacity of George Mische as he recruited others to the movement. And how Tom and Marjorie Melville and John Hogan used the trial to publicize U.S. imperialism in Guatemala where they had worked with its victims. We learn of the complex Mary Moylan, a woman neglected by history, by the movement, and even, it seems, by the FBI.

Like the Melvilles and John Hogan, Moylan saw the imperialistic connections, in her case between the
expensive war, the poor in Uganda where she had missioned, and the even more disenfranchised African-Americans in the DC neighborhood where she lived with the Misches after returning to the States. Friends remember her as lively and engaged during those times, with an obstinence that refused to back down. So it rends one's heart to read of the changes wrought in her life after the trial and sentencing.

Like Phil and Dan Berrigan, Moylan also decided not to submit to imprisonment. She had become increasingly involved as a feminist since returning and wanted to show the world that women could also take this additional risk. Further, she resolved to seek support only from women, in solidarity with other women activists, not necessarily nonviolent. In her decision, she distanced herself from the Catholic Church and from the Catonsville group.

To avoid detection, she also dyed her beautiful red hair a murky black. Eluding a not-very-vigilant FBI, she lived hither and yon and sometimes awkwardly with her sisters in resistance. Finally in 1979, she turned herself in. After serving her time in Alderson Federal Prison, she went back to her nursing, but became increasingly reclusive and disturbed, finally dying in 1995, “‘poor, alone, and forgotten,’ according to Rosemary Reuther.” Her neglected story points out the sexism of U.S. culture as a whole, a sexism mirrored in the ultra-resistance of the Catholic Left.

What of the lessons for activists from the Catonsville Nine and from this book in particular? What contrasts can we see between resistance then and resistance now? First the commonalities: A committed, skillful, and coordinated support community is just as important now as it was when the Catonsville Nine Defense Committee was writing press releases and Willa Bickham and Brendan Walsh of Viva House Catholic Worker were feeding hundreds of supporters every evening. The support group existed hand-to-mouth but was able to raise the money to publish several nationwide ads urging people to “come to Agnew Country,” proving that checkbook activism works. Support communities enthusiastically planned and attended rallies and vigils and trial-related protests in Maryland and throughout the country. They also provided as much support as was possible in the heavily guarded courtroom itself.

These tactics still work in publicizing resistance trials, but defendants today are usually muzzled by judges forbidding defendants from using the prosecutor’s pre-trial list of forbidden terms—terms such as “first strike,” “Geneva Convention,” even the word “children.” In the Catonsville trial, the defendants were relatively more free and were fairly successful in discussing their motives and in putting the war itself on trial.

Thirdly, resistance breeds resistance. If people hear about it. People new to activism, with their cell phones and instant access to email and the internet may find it hard to understand how communicating only by phone and post worked. But it did. The late Sixties were a time when thousands of young people were on the move around the country, grouping and regrouping in amorphous configurations. The trial of the Catonsville Nine and the recruiting done by the group took advantage of this movement and served as an impetus to similar actions. It is estimated that upwards of 100 draft board raids followed on the Nine, culminating in the large Camden 58 action in 1972, with its dramatic trial and rare acquittal.

What is strikingly different about the Catonsville Nine and later resistance work is the lack of mainstream media attention. Civil disobedience today just doesn’t make news unless it’s violent. The media seems bored with trespass, petulant about property destruction, prosaic about prison terms. The rise of social media and alternative internet news sites means that news of resistance actions reaches mainly like-minded people, with correspondingly few avenues to increase their numbers. What non-violent actions can speak to the public as Catonsville did? I wish I knew.

Rosalie Riegle is an oral historian and retired professor of English. A resident of Evanston, Illinois, she serves on the National Committee of WRL.
Contents of #1 July 24, 2011

Books
Jane Fonda, Peacemaker
Cluster Bombs, Special Section (small sample of sources)
 Civilians Killed (small sample)
Casualties in Wars

Contents of #2

Chemical War Crimes:  Agent Orange Action Group
Nick Turse, War Crimes, Kill Everything that Moves
Tirman, Civilians Killed
Films
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  Vietnam and Iraq
Returning Vets Spat Upon?

END VIETNAM WAR NEWSLETTER #4

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Dick Bennett
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